

# Effects of COVID-19 on Learning and Development of Children:

## Insights from a Survey of Parents After Opening of Schools

**Research Team, National Coalition on the Education Emergency**

### *Abstract*

*The National Coalition on the Education Emergency (NCEE) undertook a study of poor households in Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu to understand the lived realities for children who had to cope with the 18-month-long disruption in schooling that was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted through a survey of parents. To our knowledge, this is the first survey of its kind that has been conducted after schools began re-opening in India. Around 500 households having 900 children between the ages of 6 and 18 were covered between September 2021 and January 2022. This paper presents the methodology and findings of this study that were originally published in [the report 'Cries of Anguish'](#) (NCEE, 2022). The findings reveal the deep fissures in the system through which thousands of children have been falling. The study also brought to attention the resilience of these families who seem to have been failed by the system and yet carried on with the hope that the opening of schools would prove to be the light at the end of their tunnel. It would be a shame and a grave injustice for their 'cries' to go unheard and for their children's rights to continue to be violated.*

**Keywords:** *online education, pandemic, school opening, socioemotional development, equity concerns*

### **Introduction**

In most states in India, middle and high schools across the country were fully or partially closed for an average of 18 months due to the pandemic. Primary schools and pre-schools or anganwadis were shut for even longer. The severity of the impact of these continuous school closures on children is almost immeasurable, especially for those from marginalized groups, who bear the brunt not only on the educational front but also on the social, emotional, and economic fronts.

At a recent public hearing held in Bengaluru organised by ActionAid Association & Slum Mahila Sanghatane, 64 case studies from 5 districts of the state of Karnataka were presented. 14 aggrieved children and their distressed families shared several concerns and challenges they have had in accessing education. The key takeaway from the report presented by the jury was that these 'parents are without jobs, their families are without food to eat and their children are without

education' (CWC, 2022; NCEE, 2022). Multiple reports and studies suggest that the school closures along with the multiple 'waves' of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in learning deprivation, a substantially larger 'digital divide' than ever before, including physical illness, malnutrition, psychological harm, child labour, and early marriages (SCHOOL, 2021; Reddy et al, 2020; Ghatak et al, 2020; Oxfam, 2020; Azim Premji Foundation, 2021; Lancet Covid-19 Commission, 2021). Through all this, it is clear that there has been a gross violation of children's fundamental rights during the pandemic. They have been deprived of their right to free and compulsory education (Article 21A), their right to life and personal liberty (Article 21) and their rights against exploitation (Articles 23 and 24), all guaranteed to them by the Constitution of India.

Against this background, a rapid survey of poor households in Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu

was conducted by the NCEE to understand the lived realities for children who had to cope with the 18-month-long disruption in education. The coalition sought to get this understanding not from the school system, teachers or NGOs, but directly from the parents who have suffered and seen their children suffer. This is the first survey of its kind that has been conducted after schools started re-opening in India. Around 500 households having 900 children between the ages of 6 and 18 were surveyed between September 2021 and January 2022. This paper presents the methodology and findings of this study that were originally published in the report '[Cries of Anguish](#)' (NCEE, 2022).

## Methodology

### Sampling

Districts were selected purposively but were largely those that are considered educationally backwards. Within these settlements, households were selected randomly, with those households which had at least

*Table 1: Sample households and details of children*

	Karnataka	Telangana	Tamil Nadu
Period of survey	Oct-Nov 2021	Dec 2021	Jan 2022
Number of districts	2	3	4
Number of households surveyed	100	212	200
Rural	51	122	130
Urban	51	90	70
Children aged 6-18 years	176	432	371
of which enrolled:	150	432	367
In govt. schools (%)	56 %	46 %	88 %
In private schools (%)	41 %	54 %	12 %

Source: NCEE, '[Cries of Anguish](#)', pp 5

Note: In Karnataka, a small percentage of children were enrolled in madrasas

one child in the age group 6-18 years being chosen. If a household that was selected at a regular interval did not have such a child, the next one was selected. In Karnataka, the survey was conducted in two districts. The sample included some households from urban settlements in Bengaluru and some from villages. In Telangana, three districts were chosen (Warangal, Mahbubnagar and Hyderabad). In Tamil Nadu, it was decided to sample from 4 districts to get a greater geographical range (Ramnad, Pudukottai, Karur and Tiruvallur). The differences in the sampling were useful for the pilot study. In particular, the Telangana sample was more differentiated in terms of socio-economic groups, while the Tamil Nadu sample was more concentrated on disadvantaged groups. Table 1 shows the sample households and details of the children. Further details of the sampling methodology are explained in the report (NCEE, 2022).

### Data Collection

The questionnaire was designed by the NCEE research team, using the categories of principles of education recovery outlined in 'A Future at Stake - Guidelines for School Opening' (NCEE, 2021). Incremental improvements to the way the questions were worded and their options were made for the Telangana and Tamil Nadu surveys. Additional questions for Tamil Nadu on the Illam Thedi Kalvi (School Comes Home) program were included. Questionnaires were translated, reviewed and entered into 'ODK' (Open Data Kit) software. This software tool was used because it can be used to collect data offline and the offline submissions are synced automatically when a connection is found. This proved beneficial to investigators who were administering the survey in remote areas that lacked proper internet connectivity. Field investigators were trained on the questionnaire and how to sample households within the selected urban and rural settlements. All interviews were conducted face to face and investigators were supported to clarify any doubts, while the survey was ongoing. Qualitative comments of the parents and of the investigators, collected in the survey instrument and through debriefing sessions with the investigators, provided a rich source of additional information.

## Ethical Considerations

The participants of the survey did so on a voluntary basis and gave their informed consent. The questionnaire was designed in a manner to collect minimum sensitive information and to provide the respondent with an option of 'don't wish to say'. The questionnaire was pre-tested and based on the responses received, certain questions were reframed.

## Data Analysis

The data collected using the ODK software was downloaded in the form of '.csv' files and synthesized using a python script. This data was then analysed using spreadsheets and R programming. From the output of this analysis, charts and tables as well as some unique visualizations were generated. Due to differences in timing of the surveys and sampling of settlements and villages, the data for the three states have not been merged. All data presented in the findings of the study are unweighted figures.

## Findings and Discussion

The main finding of the study of households in Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu was that 'poor parents are desperate about the educational future of their children and fully conscious of the devastating toll that prolonged school closure has taken on the learning, socio-emotional development and behaviour of their children'.

## Knowledge and Abilities

The survey asked parents about their child's ability to read and write' because this is a competency that parents can assess more easily than other competencies (such as mathematics). The question was asked about the youngest child who was enrolled at the time. The options given were 'improved', 'stayed the same', 'declined' or 'cannot assess'. Between 70-80% of parents felt that their children's ability to read and write had declined or stayed the same (or they were unable to assess). The differences between what parents of children in government and private schools reported are striking. Between 75-90% of children in the government schools had suffered or stagnated in their learning. The proportions for private schools were significantly lower compared to government

schools in Karnataka and Telangana, and somewhat lower in Tamil Nadu. Overall, fewer than 25% parents in each of the states felt that the ability of their youngest child to read and write had improved. The qualitative comments of the parents provided a shocking reality check. One of the respondents from Karnataka said, *"She was reading and doing better at studies in UKG. She has not been studying during the pandemic. It will be very difficult to cope after school opens. Don't know how she will manage."* Another parent's concern was expressed so aptly in this statement: *"Forgot rhymes. Forgot reading. School must open"*. Another comment was: *"The children are going to write the public exam, but they don't have much knowledge"*. This speaks of the sorry state of affairs with respect to the 'exams must go on' mindset of our examination system which became 'cruel, more than ever before' during the pandemic (Sharma, 2021). What these findings point to is that gaps in educational opportunities are huge. Summative and high-stakes assessments cannot and must not be prioritized the way they currently are as focus needs to be laid on learning recovery, and socioemotional development.

## Socio-Emotional Development and Behaviour

Throughout the study, parents highlighted the changed behaviour, lack of focus, and attention and the addiction to mobile phones amongst their children. One of the parents who responded to the survey said, *"Using mobiles for attending classes is so dangerous and it made the child lazy during the pandemic."* The survey did not pose a direct question about this aspect, so these were spontaneous responses, which indicated the extent of alarm and concern amongst parents. The key changes noted by parents were the inability to focus, lack of motivation and interest in education, addiction to mobile phones, games and TV, lack of routine and discipline, mental stress, and loneliness. One parent commented, *"Children are experiencing heightened stress levels as they can't acquire knowledge from online education."* Many parents have nobody to supervise the children when they go out to work and are forced to leave them behind to be looked after by neighbours or older children living in their settlements. Parents of young children, in particular, mentioned that their children had lost even

Figure 1: Issues identified by some parents in Tamil Nadu



Source: NCEE, & *Cries of Anguish*; pp 12

the daily routines of eating and hygiene. The issues identified by some of the respondents have been presented in Figure 1.

The findings presented above emphasise the need for education recovery programs that involve re-organising of curricula to support socioemotional development. They cannot be sidestepped in the name of 'catching up with the syllabus' and 'returning to business as usual'. Some recommendations from the NCEE that were published in 'A Future at Stake - Guidelines for School Opening' included providing enough time in lessons for children to express their emotions about themselves and others, and to engage in conversations and teamwork. The guidelines also emphasized that social emotional learning should be integrated across all subject areas and that teachers should be provided guidance on how to do this (NCEE, 2021).

### Engagement with School

As per the findings of the study, the majority of children in the sample households were enrolled and reportedly going to school. In Karnataka, about 15% of children were not enrolled at the time of the survey. In Tamil Nadu, schools had just closed in January the week before the survey, and while 97% of children were enrolled, they were not going to school. There

are likely to be more unenrolled children in remote districts, particularly in Telangana and Karnataka. Attendance data was only available in Telangana; in Karnataka, schools were just reopening when the survey was conducted and attendance was irregular, while in Tamil Nadu, the schools had closed again due to the Omicron wave, just before the survey. It is striking that, in Telangana, even two months after the opening of schools, only two-thirds of the children attended school on all days in the previous week.

A probable reason for the high levels of enrolment may be the availability of mid-day meals in government schools in these three states. The study found that 96% of children in government schools in Telangana got mid-day meals. Similarly, about 91% were getting either cooked meals or dry rations in Karnataka. In Tamil Nadu, the proportion was reported to be about 80%. This lower proportion may be due to the fact that schools were closed at the time of the survey.

The study also looked at whether parents received communication from schools during and after the lockdowns. Between 67-75% of parents in the three states reported that they received some communication from the school/district/block or other education authorities (about school re-opening, health protocols, etc). While this is encouraging, it is most

likely that these were general mass communications. In Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, more parents received such communication in government schools compared to private schools. The study found that the situation was worse regarding specific communication about the academic performance of the child. In this case, 50% or fewer parents in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu reported getting any such communication from the school or the teacher. Again, the situation was worse in private schools than in government schools. In Telangana, the proportion of parents who reported this type of communication was about 75%: close to 60% for government schools and close to 90% for private schools.

These findings give us some insight as to where the challenges lie with respect to enrolment and attendance of students. The report indicates that many children have not returned to schools. A positive finding was that most children who had returned to school, seem to have received either cooked meals or dry rations in the second half of 2021. An important implication of the findings on communication from schools is that it must be seen as an essential part of any efforts made in the direction of recovering from the learning deprivation caused by the pandemic. It is necessary in order to increase enrolment and attendance, to enable parents to support socio-emotional development and understand how they can support their child in learning.

### Tamil Nadu's Community Based Program - 'Illam Thedi Kalvi' (School Comes Home)

When the rapid survey of parents was conducted in Tamil Nadu, it included questions about the awareness and availability of the 'Illam Thedi Kalvi' program. The survey did not assess the quality of the program but was able to track the expansion of and attendance in the program over a short period of a month. This program is a community-based after-school program that was designed for a period of 6 months, to bring children in elementary education (grades 1-8) back to school and get them to re-engage with learning. With the help of close to 100,000 volunteers, the learning support centre would allow children to (re)develop their relationship with learning, skills of learning, etc. Another objective was to simply ensure that children,

especially those who had dropped out or were at the risk of dropping out were brought back to school. The most important findings (see table 2) and implications were:

- High level of awareness: about 95% of the parents were aware of the program, in December and in January. This shows the success of the communication efforts at the state and local levels.
- Significant increase in program availability between December and January (in or close to the neighbourhood of the households that were surveyed): 44% of parents reported that the program was not available in December. This had reduced to 25% in January, reflecting a rapid expansion of the program. Availability increased more rapidly in rural areas in this sample, compared to urban areas
- Increase in children's participation between December and January: Of the children whose parents were aware of the program, who were eligible, and who had access to the program, 36% attended on all or most days in December. This proportion rose to 45% in January. The increase in

**Table 2: Illam Thedi Kalvi: Awareness, Availability, Eligibility and Participation**

	December 2021	January 2022 (1 <sup>st</sup> week)
<b>Awareness/availability/eligibility</b>	<b>Percentage of all parents</b>	
Parent was NOT AWARE about the program	5 %	6 %
Program was NOT AVAILABLE in the settlement or nearby	44 %	26 %
Child was NOT ELIGIBLE	10 %	10 %
Total of above	59 %	42 %
<b>Of those who were aware, could access program and child was eligible:</b>	<b>Percentage of the subset of parents</b>	
Child attended ALL/MOST days	36 %	45 %
Child attended SOME days	24 %	24 %
Child attended NO days	40 %	30 %

Source: NCEE, 'Cries of Anguish', pp 18

Note: Data are for the youngest child who is currently enrolled.

participation may be due to increased availability and the fact that schools had closed in January.

### Availability of Textbooks

In government schools, in Karnataka and Telangana, less than two-thirds of students had all textbooks. In Tamil Nadu, the proportion was over 80%. Most of the remainder had at least some books. Almost all students in private schools in Telangana and Tamil Nadu had all textbooks, while about 72% of private school students had this in Karnataka. Taking into account those participants who shared that the child had some books, the proportion of children in government schools who had no textbooks at all was negligible. The pattern was similar across different levels of education.

In the context of the learning crisis reflected by the findings of this survey and other similar studies (SCHOOL, 2021; Azim Premji Foundation, 2020), the relevance of sheer textbook availability may not be significant. With children having fallen behind by almost two years and younger children having forgotten even the alphabet, having a single textbook for each class, in which children are at very different levels, is clearly insufficient. The use of language and other textbooks from earlier grades in the class could be helpful. A small library of textbooks of all previous grades can be made available for student use. In all cases, teachers need to be trained and regularly supported to use a variety of materials to address the different learning levels of children.

### Extra Support for Learning

Parents were asked about whether the school had been providing additional after-school classes, or classes on weekends and vacations, provided free of charge. They were also asked whether their child, in addition to attending school, watched educational programs on television or on the phone (if these are provided), or listened to them on the radio. Parents were also asked if they provided private tuition to their child. The results are presented in Table 3. These responses are to be treated as indicative, as parents may not have a precise idea of what the child is doing (for instance, the child may be purportedly watching TV or following classes on the phone but may not be engaged in

learning). Private tuition was not widespread among the sample children in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, reflecting the fact that the sample was focused more on the disadvantaged sections. 40% children in Telangana were reported to be taking private tuition. This could be because, in Telangana, the sample had a broader dispersion of caste and occupation groups than in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Table 3: Extra support for student learning

	Karnataka	Telangana	Tamil Nadu
<i>Percentage of parents</i>			
<b>Some extra classes organized by school (after hours):</b>			
<b>Govt. schools</b>	23 %	38 %	13 %
<b>Private schools</b>	5 %	39 %	42 %
<b>Watches educational programs on TV</b>	15 %	35 %	15 %
<b>Follows classes on phone</b>	38 %	60 %	24 %
<b>Listens to educational programs on radio</b>	12 %	18 %	11 %
<b>Private tuition</b>	12 %	40 %	8 %

Source: NCEE, 'Cries of Anguish', pp 20

Note: The questions were asked about the youngest child who is currently enrolled.

### Online vs Face-to-face Interactions

The opinions of parents about online education were unequivocal: that children learnt virtually nothing. While they acknowledged that health and safety were important, parents were found to be overwhelmingly in favour of keeping schools open for in-person learning. In particular, parents highlighted the fact that children could not follow lessons, could not comprehend, and did not enjoy online classes (usually taken via phone, if at all), leading to a loss of interest and motivation. The lack of devices and stable internet connectivity, the need to supervise children closely to keep them engaged, and the need to support them academically, were other reasons cited by parents for wanting schools to be open. Given the concerns raised in the media about COVID-19 transmission, there were also some concerns expressed by parents about whether sanitary precautions are being followed and the risks to

Figure 2: Issues with online education identified by some parents in Telangana



Source: NCEE, 'Cries of Anguish', pp 21

children. Some examples of the major concerns of parents can be seen in Figure 2.

**Financial Burdens**

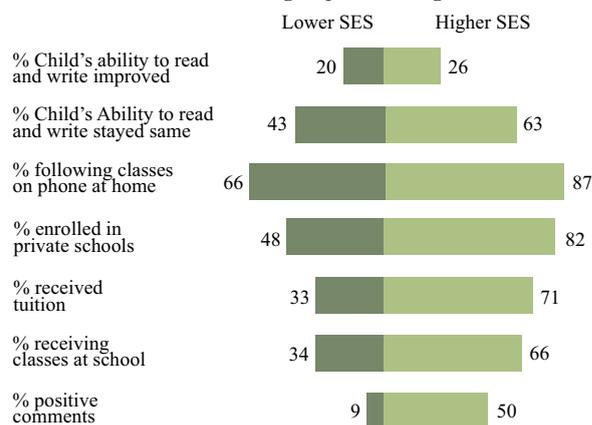
Two main concerns that emerged through the study were that parents were unable to pay fees in private schools and they had to bear the extra financial cost of online classes (paying for devices and data), whether in government or private schools. In Tamil Nadu, about 15% of parents who had children in private schools said they had not paid the fees. During the previous year, the proportion was 6%. In the Telangana sample, while only 4% of parents said they had not paid fees in private schools for the current academic year, about 20% did not pay fees during the previous year. The additional financial burdens imposed on parents due to online education is not highlighted often. In fact, during the pandemic, it appeared that poor parents have had to pay more to access online education of low quality or else forego education for their children.

**Education Inequality**

The sample in Telangana had a broader dispersion of caste and occupation groups than in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. These households were separated into two broad socio-economic groups to study them in greater depth. The relatively 'higher socio-economic status'

group had the following characteristics: employed in 'formal sector', belongs to 'other castes', and speaks English at home, while the 'lower socio-economic status' group had the following characteristics: employed in 'informal sector', belongs to SC/ST/OBC, does not speak English at home. The striking differences in the educational experiences of children

Figure 3: Differences in parents' responses across socio-economic groups in Telangana



Source: NCEE, 'Cries of Anguish', pp 25

from these two groups are shown in Figure 3 for a selected set of important variables.

The findings indicate that the period of school closures deepened inequality in the system. While children from poor and marginalized families found it extremely challenging to access online education,

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those parents who could support their children's online education felt that their children had made some academic progress, even during the pandemic.

### Conclusion

The findings of this rapid survey of parents in three states have implications for how the reopening of schools should be reorganised. There is a need to not only 'resume' but also 'renew' education. Many parents in this study have expressed the hope that with the return to school, their children can improve in learning. But the reality is that, as these children return to school, teachers face incredible challenges in the classroom. Resuming the normal academic curriculum, offering short bridge courses or some cursory 'remedial classes' will not cut it. A comprehensive recovery plan will have to be developed by each state. Decentralized teacher interactions at cluster and block levels, with facilitation, to discuss challenges, identify local solutions and share successes, as well as support for children's learning and development outside schools through community learning centres and parents are essential.

Many state governments and the Union Government are pushing for digital solutions, but the overwhelming response of parents from disadvantaged groups is clear: keep schools open; online learning is not working for children; many children are excluded, and there are unforeseen impacts on children's behaviour. Without parents who are able to guide and support children at home, the broad-brush use of

technology can only lead to greater inequality. Any technological components should be simple, those which can be handled by teachers, and mainly for teacher support such as sharing of resources, accessing open education resources, and teacher webinars. The danger of reinforcing passive approaches, for example, watching videos during the class instead of facilitating children's learning, must not be underestimated.

The community-based Illam Thedi Kalvi (School Comes Home) program launched by the Tamil Nadu government is proof that a massive communication and mobilization effort is possible in order to complement the changes introduced in the school curriculum, especially at the foundational level. The Karnataka government has also launched Kalika Chetarika (Learning Recovery), an initiative which prioritizes learning recovery for the next year. These seem to be positive steps from a policy-making perspective but their success will depend on how they are implemented and how they impact children's lives on the ground. Guidelines such as 'A Future at Stake' (NCEE, 2021) and 'Covid-19 Recovery and Early Years' Education' (NCEE, 2021) can be very useful in enabling systemic changes at the school, cluster, block, and eventually state level. More steps in this direction and their adoption are the need of the hour. Every child is important and every child should be supported.

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